San Antonio Review

Berard Reviews

"Mainstreaming Black Power"

Peter Berard¹

¹**San Antonio Review**

Published on: May 30, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/9b43cd98.fd2cde67

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Mainstreaming Black Power**Tom Adam Davies****University of California Press, 2017**

9780520292116

328 pages

I read this out of a desire to get a more finely-grained picture of the recession of the Black Freedom Movement in the 1970s, and what came after. The more I think of it, the more I think that this defeat shaped everything that came after, in much the same way as late nineteenth-century Europe lived under the shadow of the suppression of the Paris Commune. I've been thinking of the ways in which being born and living under the shadow of this defeat — even if people didn't acknowledge it very often — must have affected my generation and the generation before mine. Basically, the "cancel culture" flap over the summer and a few other things had me thinking thoughts about "Gen X" and

Well, this is all getting far afield from the actual subject of this book. The phrase "Black Power" scares people, to this day, white people generally (but not exclusively). When I was in grad school, it was often treated as a hard, fast dividing line — there was the Civil Rights Movement, then there was Black Power. People had different ideas about the valence of that shift but agreed that it happened, and agreed that black power was a shift into revolution, the sort of thing the Man can't touch, for better or for worse. You can see why, given the long (and continuing) tradition of Black Power martyrs and the way people like J. Edgar Hoover freaked out over the concept.

This was never the whole story. Davies opens this book by discussing a memo circulated in the Johnson White House about how Black Power is actually good, that it

promised to bring Black people into the political and economic system, to get Black people, to use subsequent President Richard Nixon's phrase, "a piece of the action." You can say that's white politicians appropriating something and neutralizing it, and that's not entirely wrong. But it was awfully soon in the concept's career for that, and as Davies makes clear, Black Power meant a lot of different things to a lot of different people. For some people, who it'd be hard to dismiss as not really "getting it," like CORE leader Floyd McKissick, Black Power was absolutely as Nixon described it. There were always conservative and capitalist strains in black nationalism. Among other things, the Black Power emphasis on "unity" made it hard to draw lines within the movement, even if people had been inclined to, that might solidify the concept and keep it out of the mouths of white politicians like Nixon and Robert Kennedy.

Nixon and Kennedy represent two of the standard means through which the political structure as it existed could make use of the Black Power movement/concept. Nixon, as mentioned, went in big for "Black capitalism." Davies seems to think he meant it, for whatever it was worth, but I wonder how much it was just a placeholder for the guy, whose heart was never in domestic policy and certainly not in improving Black lives, something to say that was a little more cautious than the softened George Wallace-line which Reagan eventually perfected. Robert Kennedy, for his part, was a great proponent of the War on Poverty and for the participatory elements therein. If people in ghetto communities could get involved in Community Action Programs and the like, people like Kennedy and the social scientists behind him figured, they could build up their own political and economic power in such a way that doesn't threaten the basic integrity of the American system. Like a lot of liberalism, it was about channeling popular energy away from revolution and into incremental change within the system as it stood.

Black Power-influenced groups got involved in both types of action. Much of the book is about how that went, primarily in New York, Los Angeles, and Atlanta. It's a sad story of some substantial accomplishments — new schools, job programs, Black "firsts," etc. — but consistent frustrations as white power structures saw to it that Black Power manifested itself in ways nonthreatening to the racist system as a whole. Easy to say from here, and I'm not trying to fault the militants for working with what they had, but it seems inevitable that both Kennedy's and Nixon's approaches were bound to fail. "Black capitalism" without substantial and basically un-capitalist redistribution of wealth is just setting up Black people to scabble against each other for the scraps white people left behind. Kennedy's people-powered (but strictly managed) welfarism is at least a little closer to redistribution, but still leaves white

people in charge of the commanding heights of the economy and political system and Black and poor people at their mercy. Black mayors elected around this time could run the gamut from race-proud Maynard Jackson in Atlanta to race-neutral ex-cop Tom Bradley in Los Angeles, but either way, they found themselves up against the cold realities of racialized capitalism.

I guess if this book gets across one thing relevant to why I picked it up, it's how fragile, contingent, and brief the window for serious change really was. The War on Poverty included as much community participation as it did because LBJ didn't fully understand what he was signing, Davies argues. White backlash was already stirring before "Black Power" came along to scare everyone, and that backlash, combined with the economic damage that came along with neoliberalism, combined to make mass incarceration the central reality of American racial politics after the 1970s. There was never a moment where either militants or reformers (and the two categories weren't nearly as distinct as you might think) could be confident that they had much room to maneuver- they were in constant emergency mode.

Anyway, this book was pretty good. It did its job and got into the nitty-gritty of community efforts in its three subject cities without making any really outsized claims, I guess appropriate for a recent Black history book written by a white British guy. It's what I think of as "dissertation-y," all cautious and somewhat plodding, which I guess makes sense as it probably was the guy's dissertation. The academic history ladder is such a slippery pole that for a lot of people, getting their dissertation out is all they can do for a good decade or so book-wise, which sucks as they probably have more interesting writing and ideas rattling around. Some people, of course, don't even get that far and just write about people who do in reviews that aren't even peer-reviewed! Oh, life.

Peter John Berard, Ph.D., serves as San Antonio Review's Book Review Editor. He is a historian, writer and organizer in Watertown, Mass.